

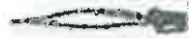
# YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO

Navigating Structures of Authority

YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO  
Victoria Cox, Fall 2012  
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Compiled By Victoria Cox in conjunction with  
Nature & Transcendentalism, Fall 2012



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by Giulio Maestro) and other things I found in the trash.



Special thanks to Professor T.S. McMillin and everyone  
who loaned me their voice for this project.

When it gets right down to it, I think these answers show the biggest difference between my cohort and Thoreau's. In many ways, he is absolutely right. Persisting in unjust systems is furthering injustice even if it does not directly affect us. We shouldn't be satisfied with a system that is merely tolerable and does not actively advance the dignity of the individual. If this is the absolute message of Civil Disobedience, then I do not think anyone quoted here would disagree. And yet, holding these principles in common, we diverge in our response to it. Thoreau concludes his essay as follows:

*"However, the government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live under a government, even in this world. If a man is thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free, that which is not never for a long time appearing to be to him, unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him."*

Our world is bigger than Thoreau's, and more heavily governed by a long shot. Given the reality of our present circumstances, we have to fumble our way forward and eke out new theories that we can live with. And, at least for the ones that I live with, this necessitates trusting and taking care of each other, and using that support as balance and advocacy against systems of authority that might otherwise crush or absorb us. In the industrial and globalized society that I live in, I know my mind is not enough. It cannot be enough. I need the perspective and experience of people I trust to tell me when I'm wrong. This is why I'm giving this to you. If we're going to keep struggling for answers, it is imperative that we can talk to each other. People in uniform give me panic attacks; I can't shake the feeling that my professors think I don't belong here; I'm shocked when people take me seriously and furious when they don't; and *I need other voices to remind me where I actually stand*. We are all working to push these systems of authority in any direction, we are entrenched and implicated even if we are able to momentarily ignore them. The power that we hold and that holds us is real. Thanks for reminding me. You're the reason it matters at all, at the end of it.





*"I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they did not greatly propose to do right; that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions"*

-H.D. Thoreau

Up until my final question, my survey provoked answers that were uniform in their uncertainty, in our desire to give nuanced answers that reflected mixed feelings. But after interrogating my friends about the ways they think about the weird invisible scaffolding that holds us in, I asked where they go when they are in trouble. And here, I got immediate, concrete, unequivocal answers.

**My mom! I would talk to my parents.**

-A.H.

**I would try to ignore it for a really long time and then if I had to ask, it would be a friend.**

-A.E.

**When things are really bad I call my mom or my dad—my mom for emotional things and my dad for practical things. But if I can avoid talking to my parents I try talking to my friends first.**

-C.T.

**My dad. I just feel like he would probably get there faster even than people here. And he lives eight hours away. Efficient fellow.**

-E.B.

**I would go to first my friends and then my parents.**

-J.V.

**I would go to my friends first probably because they're immediately there. And I think they're smart, and I think we're on the same level. None of them are going to browbeat me. Normally if I go to authority they make me feel bad about myself for asking for help**

-S.T.

**If it's something that you can figure out on your own, or with the help of family or friends, or colleagues, or if you are in a spiritual or religious group, I would definitely go to them before anything higher up.**

-R.M.



## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

To introduce his now-classic essay, "Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau seized on a functional axiom describing his position on authority: "That government is best which governs least." As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau advocated for the absolute primacy of the individual mind. From his perspective, governance—at least in the extant states that he observed—functions as an impediment to the progress of man, and he mandated rejecting all such systems that sought to impose themselves as greater than the individual thinking man. This essay is profound and provocative, but I also found it difficult to muster a critical response—how can we talk about escaping the guise of authoritarian structures while we necessarily engage with them? In order to channel the true spirit of Transcendentalism, I knew I would have to carefully examine these issues myself, using the singular guiding light of my own mind. And yet, given that I have been laboring under many assumptions that Thoreau and co. would find unenlightened, and that I am subsuming myself within a regime of authority every time I sign the honor code, and just through the nature of Truth as a slippery abstract, I was (I hope understandably) uncertain as to where I should situate my response. Thoreau is certain that "the State does not know its friends from its foes." So I decided to ask my friends.

I ended up gathering responses from twelve people—a group that self-selected on the virtues of caring about authority enough to talk about it at length, and caring about me enough to answer my messages. They are all upperclassmen, all members of the college, so this is a group who knows how to interact with authority successfully enough to graduate, probably. I'm also not friends with no fools.

Given these qualities, I was not entirely surprised at the overwhelming responsive similarities I encountered. But given that Oberlin students do come from so many different places, and that we pride ourselves on our individualist natures and radical ideas, it is interesting to see how easily we reach consensus on this topic, and the places where we diverge. The quotes I chose tend to be indicative of the responses I received as a whole, but no single statement should be taken as definitive or representative of the group, or the class, or the College.

While none of my friends are prone to explicitly transcendental reflection, I think the argument can be made that thinking critically about your own perspective and then sharing it can only ever be reaching toward Transcendentalism.

What we found is not revolutionary, nor perhaps transcend, but it is thoughtful. And it's talking about you. And if I end up reifying authoritarian systems that insult your soul, we can fight about it when you're done reading.





## REGIMES OF POWER

At times it was hard to untangle what we meant when we said 'authority.' These systems are complicated, especially when seen from the inside. Here are some of the ways we think authority functions, and what gives it the power that it has.

**I think a thing we are all under is the idea of what a citizen or a human or a person in our culture is and should be, there's a normative human culture and whoever matches with that the most gets to be the authority.**

-J.H.

**I think it's scary how much some people love it, and it's hard to parse out how much of that is personal, and how much is the social idea that to have authority is the desired endpoint.**

-A.H.

**I think depending on the situation, if I were to think who knows how to mobilize and respond, as much as I am very skeptical about the police, I think I might also not know who could be there in an instant.**

-C.S.



**There's a reason power structures exist. I am for the government governing things to the extent that it protects people**

-J.H.

**Social position has a lot to do with how I encounter and interact with authority...I feel like I have the privilege to not notice a lot of the authorities around me because they benefit me, a lot of the time. So it's hard to think about or notice the more subtle forms of authority, but I think there are a lot of other people who are forced to notice those things more than I do.**

-J.G.H.

**I think it's important to have a government. And I know that a lot of kids who go to Oberlin don't believe in that. But I do. I'm probably part of systems of authority that I'm just not aware of.**

-R.M.

**I hear Thoreau is bullshit.**

-A.E.



## GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF

Regarding the authority that we possess, we are ambivalent, and can't help but treat it as a bit of a joke. This is something we know about the slippery nature of the concept: it only seems real to those who don't hold it. I think this liminal space is crucial to the way we subsequently move within power systems—we feel incapable and uncomfortable, as if we can't be taken seriously, and then when we are it validates both our ambition and our discomfort. Is this the way everyone in a position of power feels? Is this why vice principals are such totalitarian assholes? It's puzzling.

**I'm a TA, that's a power trip, right?**

-R.M.

**I tutor middle school so I have some shaky semblance of authority there, but it doesn't really feel like it.**

-E.B.

**I try to diffuse my role of authority. I like having it, and I like being like, sweet, I'm competent enough of a writer, I'm good at this job, and I kind of think it's good for my self-esteem, but also I don't actually like being an authority over people...I never want to be an authority figure.**

-A.H.

**I'm in some positions of authority on campus that really have no impact on anyone else, or myself. I guess to freshman I'm in sort of an authority figure as staff at the radio station. And I guess it's hard sometimes because I wield so much power, but I try to keep myself grounded.**

-A.E.

**I am editor-in-chief of the Grape. I rule with an iron fist, with a heavy boot ready for the neck of any hippie in my way. I'm also a writing associate, so in some ways I'm a writing authority, or when it comes to academic discourse on campus.**

-J.H.

**I love being seen as an authority. It's interesting because the kids [at camp] probably see you as this big all-powerful authority that they're trying to subvert, but it feels like I'm just desperately trying not to let my power slip, but they probably wouldn't even think about that as a possibility. I probably seemed like I had it way more together than I actually did.**

-J.G.H.

**I'm not in a position of authority very much, except I guess I'm a white dude in college. Other than that, though, I try to avoid being in positions of authority because I don't think I'm a very good leader of anybody but myself.**

-S.T.

**I think authority is really hard at this age in particular, because we're legally able to be authority members, to be responsible for people who are younger than us, but we also still have to answer to authority figures who may not understand our circumstances.**

-C.T.

## AUTHORITY AS SUPPORT

Contrary to what my mom and dad might believe, we can willingly submit ourselves to authority when it's in our best interest. Here are the ways we find systems of authority to be useful— even necessary.

**It changes with age. And I think there's authority that you respect, that you put in that position, and then there's authority that you're coerced into respecting and you don't necessarily want them to exist but they do.**

-R.M.

**I have to structure a lot of things in my life around the school, which I feel like is a thing I willingly subject myself to. And there are authority structures in my family which are not too rigid but are definitely there, to a certain degree.**

-J.G.H.

**There are definitely things my parents could do because they were adults and I was not, they could get certain places...I think it's good to have people in authority as allies sometimes, in certain situations.**

-C.S.

**[On emergency extensions:] It was really great that somebody had the power to absolve me and give me what I needed. A professor can always be like 'no,' they can be fussier, but I feel like the Dean rules in this weird way that supersedes anything else that might happen.**

-C.T.

**I go to office hours a lot. At this point all professors expect different things, and with all that ambiguity, and so many unclear evaluation models, I think the only way you can succeed in the system is to get people to tell you what the fuck they want.**

-J.H.

**Safety and Security is an example of how authority can be used in a safer way, because from my experiences they're really not trying to get you in trouble. They don't try to give you a hard time unless you're giving them a hard time, which I think is how it should be.**

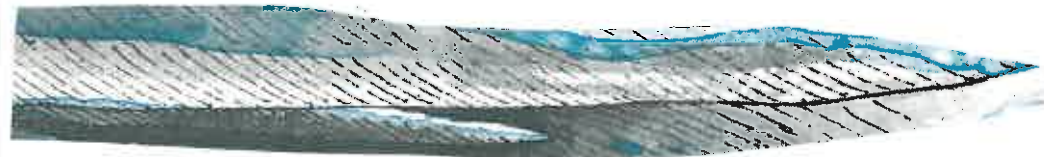
-M.O.

**In my field I think I respect academic authority pretty wholesale.**

-J.G.H.

**I think if I was having an internal issue I would try to figure it out. If someone was having a serious enough problem that I was concerned for them or myself, I would turn to professionals because they are skilled in that sort of thing. I just don't feel equipped to help them.**

-R.M.



## FIGHTING THE MAN

*"All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of '75"*

- H.D. Thoreau



Perhaps unsurprisingly, we were all really antagonistic when we were growing up. We uniformly hated stupid teachers and arbitrary restrictions, and tried to fight back—strategically, ineffectually, or silently.

**Growing up, being a child and having parents was a constant conflict with authority.**  
-E.B.

**Freshman year [of high school] I just took a hall pass. I kept it in my backpack and then just whipped it out when I needed it...I had several issues with the administration in my high school. I haven't really had an issue with Oberlin, because I don't really feel it as much here.**  
-R.M.

**When I was in elementary school or middle school, if I had a teacher I didn't like, I wouldn't take it. I had a terrible fourth grade teacher when I was growing up, and she and I were always in conflict...I didn't get it. I was like, you can't tell me not to do that, that's stupid.**  
-C.T.

**I'm rude to cops. And S&S people. I used to get into a lot of fights with teachers in middle and high school, but I don't do that any more. But I used to be blatantly pretty rude and start tiffs. I got into at least two tiffs, one with this dumbass Spanish teacher that I hated.**  
-A.E.

**Usually you expect to give up something to an authority and then to get something back, and I was like, if you're not going to do anything when I get punched in the face, it's pretty stupid.**  
-J.H.

## BUT WHAT IS GOVERNMENT REALLY

*"I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it"*

- H.D. Thoreau

When I asked for responses to Thoreau's less-is-more governmental approach, no one wholeheartedly agreed. It seems like we pretty much believe in the powers of democracy, both to uphold and to change the system under which we live. Perhaps it is only here that this stance would read as startlingly conservative, but it also gives me a sneaking suspicion that Thoreau would not call any of my friends 'Men.' I think I can live with that. Here is where our governmental priorities fall.

**I think places in the world that have a better quality of life, where people are happier, where I would want to be, are governed more.**  
-A.H.

**I think the government that governs best governs in the middle. I don't really want to get into the topic of anarchy, but... having some sort of system in place I think is usually safe.**  
-C.T.

**I don't like things like neoliberalism that are just like, let the market do what it wants, the government doesn't get involved, you are responsible for your life and if you fuck up that's your problem, I don't like that because I think we have an obligation as citizens to provide services to others.**  
-C.S.

**Personally I'm against lots of forms of social government—I think whatever goes on between consenting adults in their homes (or shitty motel rooms) is fine and not the government's fucking business, so in that regard I totally agree, get the fuck out of our lives. But on the flip side I think that the reason we created government is to get something from it. We didn't just do this arbitrarily.**  
-J.H.

**Bullshit. Maybe if we were all good people, then that would be okay, but I don't think we are. So sometimes we need a little bit of authority... I think authority loses touch with the fact that it was ever not authority, and that's the real issue with it.**  
-S.T.

**I think the government that governs least allows people to get oppressed. It's not like authorities and structures of power don't already exist in society without them being solidified in government, and I feel like the role of government is, ideally, to try and break down those things and make them a little more equitable and help people who can't help themselves. I'm not saying that is necessarily how it plays out in practice, but I'm not confident that things would be better or fairer or safer without forms of government.**  
-E.B.



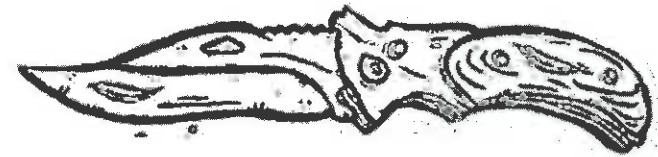




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*"It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right."*

- H.D. Thoreau



Outside of the desperate territory of primary education, it looks like we've relaxed a lot on our urge to lay siege to the system. Maybe this is a function of age, something to do with getting a bigger perspective or resolving our hormonal furies, but it also has to do with the fact that we don't feel directly subjected anymore. Now, we can ignore them, or walk away.

**I think for me, knowing that i don't respect a lot of authority figures in my life is just for my own peace of mind, a way that i can insure to myself that I'm being subversive when I'm not really doing anything. It's like, oh, I don't respect you, but you don't know that. It's stupid.**

-A.E.

**I'm not the kind of person to have direct conflict with authority because I'm afraid of what the repercussions would be. There have definitely been times in jobs that i've had where the authority figure was mean to workers or made people cry, and I had a conflict with that, but if I had done anything I would have been fired.**

-J.V.

**Whenever you take something to 'the authorities,' it's like it becomes real. It gets put on the record and becomes a real problem, a real issue, and not a temporary thing. It's permanently on the record, and it's been recorded next to your name, and it's real now. So if you can avoid that it's almost as if it doesn't become a real problem.**

-R.M.

**I feel like I very rarely come into direct conflict with specific forms of authority. I really don't do that very much. I've done activist work as a student...but rarely do I subvert authority when I'm looking them in the eye. It's always more abstract.**

-J.G.H

**I haven't had enough conflicts with some forms of authority that I would need other forms of authority to counter them.**

-E.B.

## YOU NEVER SEE ME TALK TO POLICE

*"I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless."*

-H.D. Thoreau

This ambivalence holds for parents, professors, and other forms of benign instruction, but vanishes dramatically at the mention of sirens. We hate cops, or if we don't personally, we understand why other people do. And we understand that this is innately linked to our identity and how they perceive us. Here, I think, we are pushing at something that Thoreau never encountered—the threat of a police state, backed by a ever-growing prison industrial complex, underscores our lives in increasingly resonant ways. Mostly, it resonates as fear.

**I think the police often have certain perspectives on things that may not jive with, like, reality.**  
-C.S.

**I'm a cisgendered heterosexual white man, so really most cops look like me and I have the least to fear of any demographic, but ever since I was a little kid I've always been really afraid of the idea of getting in trouble, and I feel like that's what cops are there to do, is to get you in trouble.**  
-J.H.

**I honestly haven't really had negative interactions with cops in my life, which definitely has a lot to do with my race and my gender and my economic standing and all of that, which I know, but I get why a lot of people really hate the police.**  
-J.G.H.

**I'm pretty scared of cops. But I guess if I really needed to I could ask them for help. I would probably call them if I was getting murdered or something. Or if I got robbed. But I'm skeptical if they would do that much.**  
-S.T.

**I never really did anything that would have warranted the police showing up to my house, or arresting me, but the police that I grew up with were really great...But I know my experience is not in any way representative. I'm also a white, educated female; I feel like the police are going to be on my side when it comes to things like that. But I guess I just haven't had enough experience to make an assessment. I think from what I know and what I've read, there could be a lot of improvement to how they handle things.**  
-M.O.

**Fuck the police for giving me so many speeding tickets. 80mph is not that fast.**  
-A.E.

**I think, like most people, I feel pretty uncomfortable. Maybe not everyone feels that way. Actually all of my interactions with cops have been really terrible... I'm sure they do have a good purpose, I've just never been on the receiving end of it.**  
-C.T.

**For some people I think safety is a good thing, and having police is a good thing, and for other people that is incredibly unsafe. Calling the cops could be the worst possible thing you could do in a certain situation...I grew up like 'call 911,' And I recognize I am part of the population that views calling the cops as safe.**  
-C.S.

**I guess cops, and I guess to some extent firemen, make me a little bit nervous. Just because I'm young and there's always that older disciplinarian thing going on that makes me kind of nervous. I don't think calling the cops is a thing I would do very often.**  
-E.B.

**I definitely have gotten more nervous about police since I've been in America. In England they don't have guns, so they can't really do that much...they don't carry themselves as though they are powerful in the same way.**  
-S.T.

**I think cops really flex. They really try to get you to be afraid of them and respect their authority, so I appreciate the idea that we as a society have some people there who we decided will keep us safe, but I don't see the way cops are working now as doing that.**  
-J.H.

